

Intergenerational analysis of patronymic transformations in the Quebec (Canada) population since the 17th century

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Abstract

Surnames may undergo several transformations over time. Thus, patronymic distributions observed in a population at a given time may hide changes that occurred previously, the extent of which can be estimated with intergenerational data. Using a corpus of 5,100 deep-rooted ascending genealogies from the Quebec (Canada) population, this study compares contemporary surnames with those of founding ancestors in each paternal line and identifies various patronymic mutations occurring over multiple generations. On average, paternal lines go back eight generations. About one third of all paternal lines presented at least one orthographic difference between the contemporary and the original surnames. Many surnames were transformed several times in a single paternal line, and some changes were different for a given surname along different lines. Most changes occurred among the first generations following the founding ancestors. Regional comparisons also show important variations.

Keywords: patronyms, family names, surnames, genealogies, intergenerational, generations, Quebec population

Introduction

Patronymic data are frequently used for studies in historical demography (see, for example, Darlu, 2004; Longley et al., 2007; Roman-Busto, 2015), evolutionary anthropology (Prost et al., 2008; Cheshire et al., 2011), and population genetics (King et al., 2006; Darlu et al., 2012; Martinez-Cadenas et al., 2016). Among the underlying assumptions common to this type of study are the single origin of each family name (often unverified) and the stability of its spelling over generations within a population. In truth, not all surnames are immutable. For various reasons, including those related to the linguistic distance between some newcomers and the host society, a given surname may undergo several transformations, translations or substitutions over time (Desjardins et al., 2000; Picard, 2012). In some cases, it may prove difficult to make the connection between a contemporary surname and the ancestral one from which it derived. Thus, patronymic distributions observed in a population at a given time may hide significant changes that occurred in a more or less distant past (Picard, 2007a; Dipierri et al., 2011; Lucchetti et al., 2011; Parkin, 2015; Solé-Morata et al., 2015).

The extent and impact of these changes may be difficult to assess for a whole population over a long period. Here we show that intergenerational data may be useful for such an investigation. A corpus of 5,100 ascending genealogies from the Quebec (Canada) population was reconstructed using data from the BALSAC population register (BALSAC, 2016). The main objectives of this study were to compare contemporary surnames with those of the founding ancestors in each paternal line and identify patronymic changes occurring over multiple generations.

The Quebec population

The province of Quebec is located in the eastern part of Canada (Figure 1). The vast majority of its population of 8.5 million descends from French pioneers who settled in New France during the 17th and 18th centuries (Charbonneau et al., 2000). After the takeover by the British in 1760, French immigration came to an end, and new immigrants from the British colonies, the British Isles, Ireland and other European countries started to arrive in the province (McInnis, 2000a). Although intermarriage occurred occasionally between the newcomers and the mostly Catholic French-Canadian natives, the French-Canadian population remained relatively isolated and maintained high fertility levels well into the 20th century (McInnis, 2000b; Kerr and Beaujot, 2016). As a result, most surnames in the contemporary Quebec population have a French origin (Duchesne, 2006).

Many of these contemporary French surnames have remained unchanged since their introduction to New France by the first French pioneers (Desjardins et al., 2000; Picard, 2007a). But some surnames have been modified over time. Surnames from other origins have also been altered, sometimes drastically. For example, German surnames, introduced in the Quebec population by German mercenaries who were recruited by the British army during the American revolution, were so different from the French surnames that some were translated into French or significantly transformed (Jacob, 2006 and 2015; Picard, 2007b). Although some research has been done about these surname changes in the population of Quebec, little is known about their relative frequency and when they occurred.

Data and methods

Data for this study were obtained from a corpus of 5,100 ascending genealogies. The starting points of the genealogies (the subjects) are individuals who were married in one of the seventeen Quebec regions (see Figure 1) between 1966 and 1985.¹ The genealogies (300 for each region) were reconstructed using data from the BALSAC population register (BALSAC, 2016). This register contains genealogical information about the Quebec population going back to the early 17th century. It was constructed from marriage, baptism and death records transcribed in parish registers since the beginning of French colonization (Bouchard et al., 1995; Charbonneau et al., 2000).

Genealogies were reconstructed up to the first immigrants who came to Quebec. Thus, in most cases, the genealogical branches go back to the 17th century, reaching the first French pioneers. Patronymic data were analyzed in all paternal lines. The surnames of the contemporary subjects, as written in their marriage certificates, were compared with those of the immigrant ancestors identified in each paternal line. Results of these comparisons were then classified into three categories:

- 1) no change
- 2) minor change (spelling variation with no or with only a slight difference in the pronunciation of the surname)
- 3) major change (in both spelling and pronunciation).²

Distribution of results in each of the seventeen regions were calculated and compared. Detailed examples were selected to illustrate and explain some of the observed changes.

Results

On average, paternal lines in the Quebec genealogies go back some 8 generations (Table 1). Results show that in most cases, there is no difference between the surnames introduced by immigrant ancestors and that of their contemporary descendants. However, the proportion of surnames that remained unchanged varies significantly according to the region, from 55.7% (Outaouais) to 79.7% (Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean). Regions located in the eastern part of the province (see Figure 1) tend to show the lowest proportions of surname changes. At the opposite, genealogies from the western regions (in an around Montreal) have higher proportions of changes. Results also show that, with a few exceptions, most of the changes observed in the regional genealogies are not minor. Up to two thirds of all changes are considered major.

Table 2 shows some examples of patronymic changes observed in the Quebec genealogies. Each example represents one paternal line, the length of which varies according to the number of generations separating the subject (generation 0) from his/her paternal immigrant ancestor (generations 4 to 10). Examples are presented in alphabetical order of the subject's surname. Surnames of all ancestors in each paternal line are showed as they appear in the marriage records. The geographical origin of all immigrant ancestors (end of the paternal lines) are provided. Most of the surnames have a French origin, but examples from other origins are also given.

The first three surnames appearing in Table 2 are examples of minor changes. In these examples, the spelling of the immigrant ancestors' surname is different from that of his contemporary descendant, but the pronunciation is similar. However, comparison of the subject's and immigrant's surnames may hide some changes that occurred along the paternal line but disappeared in the following generations. An example of such changes can be seen in the BELL line: at the third and fourth generations, the surname extension LAGRENADÉ appeared with BEL, but was no longer there at the second generation, where the surname BELLE was observed (the final letter E was dropped afterwards). Such multiple changes in a single line can be observed in many of the examples shown in Table 2.

Some contemporary surnames are completely different from their original form. For example, BOULANGER vs. LEFEBVRE, CHAMPAGNE vs. LAPLANTE or SANSCARTIER vs. PAYSAN. In some cases, identical contemporary surnames may come from very different original surnames, as is the case for LAFRANCE (from DARAGON, DUBOIS or PINEL). Conversely, identical original surnames may have been transformed quite differently along different lines of descendants, as for LEFEBVRE which became BOULANGER in one line and DESCOTEAUX in another line.

These examples show that many original French surnames were transformed radically over generations, but surnames from other origins were generally transformed more frequently than French surnames. Original German surnames appearing in Table 2, such as WEBER (which became BERNARD), SHUMPF (JOMPHE) or HILDEBRAND (LEBLANC) are good examples. In the WEBER-BERNARD case, it is interesting to note that BERNARD is the first name of the immigrant WEBER and appeared subsequently as part of his grandson's surname. Another interesting case is that of SERRURIER SELOZ, whose original surname was probably SCHLOSS or SCHLOSSER (meaning locksmith or *serrurier* in French) which became MASSON.

English surnames were also transformed, such as JAMES SANSOUCY LANGLOIS to GEMME (which is phonetically similar to JAMES), or OUABARD LANGLOIS to LANGLAIS. In these examples, LANGLOIS and LANGLAIS are French terms meaning 'the English'. Other examples include NUHALTE (from Yorkshire) which became THISDELLE and HAYISMAN (from Ireland) transforming into ESMOND.

One last interesting example is that of SEIZE which became LOUIS SEIZE. The first name of the immigrant ancestor is LOUIS, who was married in 1763. His son was married in 1790 and adopted the surname LOUISSEIZE, evidently combining the first and last names of his father. Incidentally though, the French King Louis XVI began his reign in 1774: one may thus assume that the surname LOUIS SEIZE (*seize* meaning sixteen) was also chosen in honor of the French king.

Conclusion

This study of intergenerational patronymic changes provided new insights about the relative frequency and the nature of surname transformations in the Quebec population over a period of nearly four centuries. Although most of the original surnames remained intact during the whole period, many surnames have undergone important alterations. Regional comparisons showed that

surnames were more frequently transformed among the populations of the western regions of Quebec than among those from the eastern part. This may be explained by the fact that immigration and migratory movements in general have been much more important in the western regions of the province, resulting in a greater diversity of surnames in these regions (Gagnon and Heyer, 2001; Henripin, 2003; Duchesne, 2006).

Results also showed that surname changes can occur several times in a single paternal line. Hence, simple comparisons of contemporary surnames with the original surnames may hide other intergenerational changes. These multiple changes can be detected with continuous genealogical data, as the examples presented in Table 2 have shown. Such observations also reveal the timing of surname changes. In the Quebec population, the most significant changes occurred in the first generations following the original bearers of the surnames, which may be explained in part by the fact that literacy was not as common during the 17th and 18th centuries than during the following centuries. In the case of non-French immigrants, integration to the dominant French-Canadian community may also have played a role in the francization of their surnames (Picard 2007b). Another factor which can explain the relative stabilization of surnames in the last generations is a directive issued by the Quebec authorities in 1870, stipulating that families should use only one single surname for administrative purposes (Desjardins et al., 2000). Despite this directive, results showed that some changes also occurred among the recent generations.

Notes

¹ Further details about the construction and characteristics of these genealogies can be found in Tremblay (2014a and 2014b).

² The categorization of changes in surnames was based primarily on differences in spelling as they were observed in marriage certificates. Although some surnames may have been pronounced differently in the past, changes in the pronunciation of surnames were identified using contemporary references. For more information on the pronunciation of Québec surnames, see Jacob (2006; 2015). Morin (1996; 2002) also provides useful details on the evolution of the French language in Québec since the 17th century.

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Notes on Contributor

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Figure 1. The province of Quebec and its seventeen regions



Source: Institut de la Statistique du Québec.

Table 1. Distribution (%) of Quebec paternal lines according to the type of change between contemporary and original surnames, by region

No ^a	Region	None	Minor ^b	Major ^c	Subtotal ^d	Total	generations ^e
01	Bas-Saint-Laurent	71.0	11.3	17.7	29.0	100.0	8.2
02	Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean	79.7	7.0	13.3	20.3	100.0	8.8
03	Capitale-Nationale	73.3	9.0	17.7	26.7	100.0	8.7
04	Mauricie	62.0	16.3	21.7	38.0	100.0	8.4
05	Estrie	64.3	15.7	20.0	35.7	100.0	8.8
06	Montréal	63.3	14.0	22.7	36.7	100.0	8.1
07	Outaouais	55.7	20.3	24.0	44.3	100.0	8.4
08	Abitibi-Témiscamingue	64.1	17.1	18.8	35.9	100.0	8.6
09	Côte-Nord	75.2	11.7	13.1	24.8	100.0	7.8
10	Nord-du-Québec	68.6	12.4	19.1	31.4	100.0	8.7
11	Gaspésie-IDLM	72.6	17.4	10.0	27.4	100.0	7.4
12	Chaudière-Appalaches	76.7	9.0	14.3	23.3	100.0	8.8
13	Laval	60.4	18.8	20.8	39.6	100.0	8.5
14	Lanaudière	60.3	13.7	26.0	39.7	100.0	8.2
15	Laurentides	58.5	18.1	23.4	41.5	100.0	8.8
16	Montréal	66.3	15.0	18.7	33.7	100.0	8.1
17	Centre-du-Québec	66.6	16.7	16.7	33.4	100.0	8.5

^a Region numbers as shown in Figure 1.

^b Minor spelling variation with no or with only a slight difference in the pronunciation of the surname.

^c Major variations in spelling and pronunciation.

^d Total of minor and major changes.

^e Mean number of generations between the contemporary subject and his/her paternal immigrant ancestor.

Table 2. Examples of patronymic changes in the Quebec genealogies

gen. ^a	surname	gen.	surname	gen.	surname
0	ARBOUR	0	AYOTTE	0	BELL
1	ARBOUR	1	AYOTTE	1	BELL
2	ARBOUR	2	AYOTTE	2	BELLE
3	ARBOUR	3	AYOTTE	3	BEL LAGRENADE
4	HARBOUR	4	AYOTTE	4	BEL LAGRENADE
5	HARBOUR	5	AYOTTE	5	BEL
6	HARBOUR	6	AYOTTE	6	BEL
7	HARBOUR	7	AYOT		(Franche-Comté, France)
8	HARBOUR	8	HAYOT		
	(Normandie, France)	9	HAYOT		
			(Perche, France)		
0	BERNARD	0	BERNATCHEZ	0	BLANCHETTE
1	BERNARD	1	BERNATCHEZ	1	BLANCHETTE
2	VE NE BERNARD	2	BERNATCHEZ	2	BLANCHETTE
3	VE NE BERNARD	3	BERNATCHEY	3	BLANCHETTE
4	VEVES	4	BERNECHE	4	BLANCHET
5	WEBER	5	BERNACHEZ	5	BLANCHET
	(Franconia, Germany)	6	BERNECHE	6	BLANCHETTE
		7	BERNATCHEZ	7	BLANCHET
		8	BERNECHE	8	BLANCHET
			(Gascogne, France)	9	BLANCHET
					(Picardie, France)
0	BOULANGER	0	BOURQUE	0	CHAMPAGNE
1	BOULANGER	1	BOURQUE	1	CHAMPAGNE
2	BOULANGER	2	BOURQUE	2	CHAMPAGNE
3	BOULANGER	3	BOURQUE	3	CHAMPAGNE
4	BOULANGER	4	BOURQUE	4	LAPLANTE
5	BOULANGER	5	BOURG	5	LAPLANTE CHAMPAGNE
6	LEFEBVRE BOULANGER	6	BOURG	6	LAPLANTE CHAMPAGNE
7	LEFEVRE BOULENG	7	BOURG	7	LAPLANTE
8	LEFEBVRE		(Acadie, Canada)	8	LAPLANTE
9	LEFEBVRE				(Poitou, France)
	(Île-de-France, France)				

Table 2. Examples of patronymic changes observed in the Quebec genealogies (continued)

gen. ^a	surname	gen.	surname	gen.	surname
0	DESCOTEAUX	0	ESMOND	0	GEMME
1	DESCOTEAUX	1	ESMOND	1	GEMME
2	DESCOTEAUX	2	ESMOND	2	GEMME
3	DESCOTEAUX	3	HAYISMAN	3	GEMME
4	DESCOTEAUX	4	HAYISMAN	4	SANSOUSSI
5	DESCOTEAUX		(Ireland)	5	SANSOUCIS
6	LEFEBVRE DESCOTEAUX			6	SANSOUCY
7	LEFEBVRE DESCOTEAUX			7	JACQUES SANSOUCY
8	LEFEBVRE			8	JAMES SANSOUCY LANGLOIS
9	LEFEBVRE				(Dorset, England)
	(Île-de-France, France)				
0	JOMPHE	0	LACHAPELLE	0	LAFRANCE
1	JOMPHE	1	LACHAPELLE	1	LAFRANCE
2	JOMPHE	2	LACHAPELLE	2	LAFRANCE
3	JOMPHE	3	LANGLOIS LACHAPELLE	3	DARAGON LAFRANCE
4	JOMPHE	4	LANGLOIS	4	DESRAGON
5	SCHUMPH	5	LANGLOIS	5	DESRAGON
6	SHUMPF	6	LANGLOIS LACHAPELLE	6	DRAGON
	(Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany)	7	LANGLOIS LACHAPELLE	7	DARAGON
		8	LANGLOIS	8	DARAGON
			(Île-de-France, France)	9	DARAGON
					(France)
0	LAFRANCE	0	LAFRANCE	0	LANGLAIS
1	LAFRANCE	1	LAFRANCE	1	LANGLAIS
2	LAFRANCE	2	LAFRANCE	2	LANGLAIS
3	LAFRANCE	3	PINEL LAFRANCE	3	LANGLAIS
4	LAFRANCE	4	PINEL LAFRANCE	4	LANGLAIS
5	LAFRANCE	5	PINEL LAFRANCE	5	WABORD LANGLAIS
6	PHILIPPE LAFRANCE	6	LAFRANCE	6	OUABART LANGLOIS
7	DUBOIS	7	PINEL	7	OUABARD LANGLAIS
8	DUBOIS	8	PINEL LAFRANCE	8	OUABARD LANGLOIS
9	DUBOIS	9	PINEL	9	OUABARD LANGLOIS
	(Bretagne, France)	10	PINEL		(Massachusetts, New England)
			(Normandie, France)		

Table 2. Examples of patronymic changes observed in the Quebec genealogies (continued)

gen. ^a	surname	gen.	surname	gen.	surname
0	LAPLANTE	0	LEBLANC	0	LOUIS SEIZE
1	LAPLANTE	1	LEBLANC	1	LOUIS SEIZE
2	TESSIER LAPLANTE	2	LEBLANC	2	LOUISEIZE
3	TESSIER LAPLANTE	3	LEBLANC	3	LOUIS SEIZE
4	TESSIER LAPLANTE	4	HILDEBRAND	4	LOUIS SEIZE
5	TESSIER LAPLANTE	5	HILDEBRAND	5	LOUISEIZE
6	TESSIER LAPLANTE	6	HILDEBRAND	6	LOUISSEIZE
7	TESSIER LAPLANTE	7	HILDEBRAND	7	SEIZE
8	TESSIER		(Germany)		(Lorraine, France)
9	TESSIER (Poitou, France)				
0	MASSON	0	PERREAULT	0	PLANTE
1	MASSON SERRURIER	1	PERREAULT	1	PLANTE
2	MASSON SERRURIER	2	PERREAULT	2	PLANTE
3	SERRURIER	3	PERREAULT	3	PLANTE
4	SERRURIER	4	PERREAULT	4	LAPLANTE
5	SERRURIER	5	PERREAULT	5	BONNIER LAPLANTE
6	SERRURIER SELOZ (Germany)	6	PERRAULT	6	LAPLANTE LABOURLIERE
		7	PERREAULT	7	LAPLANTE
		8	PERRAULT	8	LAPLANTE
		9	PERRAULT (Bourgogne, France)	9	LABOURLIERE LAPLANTE (Poitou, France)
0	SANSCARTIER	0	SMITH	0	THISDELLE
1	SANSCARTIER	1	SMITH	1	THISDELLE
2	SANSCARTIER	2	SMITH	2	THISDELLE
3	PESANT SANSCARTIER	3	SMITH	3	THISDEL
4	PESANT SANS CARTIER	4	SMITH	4	THISDEL
5	PESANT	5	SCHMID	5	THISDALE NOEL
6	PESANT	6	SCHMID	6	NUHALTE
7	PAYSAN (Poitou, France)	7	SCHMID (Germany)		(Yorkshire, England)

^a Generation numbers in paternal lines, from the subjects (0) to the immigrant ancestor (4 to 10). Regions/countries of origin are those of the immigrant ancestors.